

How to promote public engagement in research

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HOW TO PROMOTE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH?



Create relevance



Build trust and mutual understanding

RRI calls for the engagement of civil society organisations, and also of individual citizens in research-related activities. What motivates or hinders members of the broader public to engage in research? This article identifies important barriers to societal engagement and presents policy and practice options to lower these barriers. The work identifying these barriers and possible ways to address them are the result of the EU-funded project PROSO. The project has shown that citizen engagement in research is not just a question of time and opportunity but also of relevance, trust, legitimacy, and impact.

Since the turn of the millennium, one can observe in some parts of Europe and in some research areas increasing efforts to invite citizens to interact with others around issues and processes related to research and innovation. The idea of RRI as it has been promoted by the European Union (EU) has given new impetus to such efforts. RRI carries the vision that science and society mutually relate to each other throughout the whole research and innovation process. This vision includes the idea that the broader public enriches this process with their values, needs and expectations.

What are the views of citizens of such engagement? Do they see a role for themselves in research? Under what conditions would engagement be attractive to them? The EU-funded PROSO project has addressed such questions (Dreyer, Kosow and Dratsdrummer, 2018). It conducted national citizen panels in five European countries. The panel discussed fictitious invitations to different engagement formats (Chonkova, *et al.*, 2017).

↑ ©Dreyer, Kosow and Dratsdrummer, 2018

We should seriously consider public engagement in research as a way to enhance the resilience of the wider public to fake news and defamation of science. Importantly, citizens should be invited only in those cases in which they can be expected to meaningfully contribute, and engagement needs to happen on a fully voluntary basis.

Through this research, we have gained a deeper understanding of a widely acknowledged challenge: citizens need to be actively interested and motivated to engage in research, and several factors may hinder such engagement. Within PROSO we have identified six key barriers to citizen engagement. We refer to these barriers as lack of relevance, lack of trust, lack of knowledge and skills, lack of time and financial resources, lack of legitimacy and lack of impact. PROSO has also identified a range of potential policies and practices to address these barriers. These options are informed by multiple exchanges with those actors that appear most relevant to taking action. These include research policy makers, research funding organisations, and public engagement organisations. We exemplify in the following, how these actors can help lower barriers to citizen engagement in research.

RELEVANCE

An engagement opportunity may be more attractive when it is relevant to citizens' own interests, concerns, and goals. When engagement processes deal with practical issues and have a clear relation to every-day life, this can be an incentive to participate. Research funding organisations could take care to issue calls for research which relate to something of direct concern to citizens, for instance on how to combine a healthy diet with a busy life. In our highly dynamic world, citizens may wish to exchange views with others on how we want to live in the future. These concerns can be an incentive to get involved in what is called 'participatory agenda-setting'. Research funders can issue calls for research in which citizens can contribute to the design of research agendas by co-shaping visions for what are desirable futures. One example of such research is the EU-funded project CIMULACT (Rosa, Gudowsky and Warnke, 2018).

TRUST

An engagement opportunity may be more attractive when citizens have reason to trust the agendas of sponsors and organisers of the engagement process. A fully transparent engagement process is essential to create trust. Research organisations or other engagement performing organisations need to ensure that possible misunderstandings about the process are avoided at the point of recruitment. Citizens should, for instance, not fear that they are expected to speak 'for society'. Our research has shown that some citizens might be more inclined to participate when they are invited to exchange personal views with other citizens and thereby produced more reflected views 'from within society' that can inform research or research policy.

KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS

An engagement opportunity may be more attractive when citizens do not fear they lack the necessary knowledge and skills for the engagement process. For organisations that engage with the public it is advisable to combine dialogue and information in engagement processes, and to use information and attractive stimuli to support dialogue. More generally, policy makers and governments can contribute to building knowledge and skills by promoting scientific literacy of society as a whole. One option is to strengthen science journalism by making it an integral part of the education of journalists at universities. Governments could also embed engagement more widely in the educational systems. Teaching on civic engagement and engagement in research can be included in classes on science, citizenship or similar subjects in secondary schools. This can promote citizens' awareness, interest, and willingness to be engaged in scientific debates from an early age.



Build knowledge and skills



Provide and save resources



Provide and save resources

↑ ©Dreyer, Kosow and Dratsdrummer, 2018

Citizens need to be actively interested and motivated to engage in research, and several factors may hinder such engagement.

RESOURCES

An engagement opportunity may be more attractive when citizens do not fear they lack the necessary time and financial resources to engage.

Organisations that focus on public engagement can work with citizens in their 'natural habitats'. Lack of time is one of the reasons why engagement processes end up with smaller numbers of participants or less diversity than intended. One way for researchers to address this barrier is to seek out citizens, instead of asking citizens to come to them. This can be done, for instance, by targeting schools, contacting and speaking with people in the streets or at informal learning sites such as museums and botanic gardens. Funding organisations can recognise financial compensation for the efforts of citizens in engagement processes as eligible costs.

LEGITIMACY

An engagement opportunity may be more attractive when citizens do not doubt the legitimacy of the engagement process or their own involvement.

We have found that individuals may shun engagement if they feel that the broader public should not have a say about research, and that the only legitimate participants in research are scientifically trained professionals. They may also feel that the views, concerns and interests they have, are not relevant to the development of research and research policy. Policy makers and governments, research funding organisations and research organisations can reassure citizens and build legitimacy of public engagement by providing awards for outstanding engagement projects. Another option for governments is to visibly commit to public engagement through national strategies or guidelines.

IMPACT

An engagement opportunity may be more attractive when citizens have reason to expect real impact in terms of political or societal effects.

Currently, there is limited knowledge concerning the question of how to achieve, demonstrate or even measure societal and scientific impact of public engagement in research. Since recently, research on processes and methods to help achieve and show impact is emerging. Policy makers and governments can establish transnational infrastructures for exchanges on the results of this research and good impact practices.

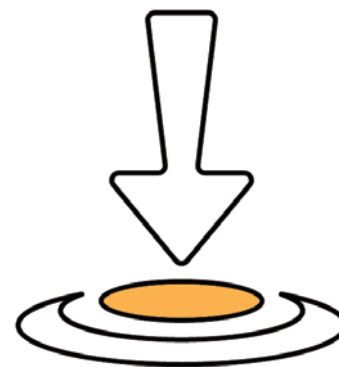
These examples show: Different actors can contribute to building supportive conditions for citizen engagement in research. Possible contributions include adaptations also in wider structures, for instance in educational systems. We are convinced that joint efforts appear worthwhile in the light of worrisome antiscientific tendencies. We should seriously consider public engagement in research as a way to enhance the resilience of the wider public to fake news and defamation of science. Importantly, citizens should be invited only in those cases in which they can be expected to meaningfully contribute, and engagement needs to happen on a fully voluntary basis.

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Links

<http://www.cimulact.eu/>



Provide for impact

↑ ©Dreyer, Kosow and Dratsdrummer, 2018

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